

THE ALASKAN GOODBYE

Travis Pownall

CHAPTER 1

The Crossing

Wyatt Morgan stood at the bow of the ferry because there wasn't anywhere else to stand that felt honest.

Inside was warm. Inside smelled of coffee that had been burned hours ago and wet coats that would never quite dry. Inside had benches and chatter and the low hum of people making plans for the weekend. Wyatt didn't want that. He wanted the wind. He wanted the cold slap of it in his face, the way it made his eyes water and his nose run and reminded him he was still solid. Still here. Wyatt stayed outside, hands locked around the railing.

The metal was slick with rain and cold enough to sting. It vibrated constantly, a faint buzzing that crawled up into his palms and settled in his wrists. The ferry pushed through the Sound with the stubborn confidence of something built to take abuse. Every swell hit the hull with a wet, heavy smack. Not a crash. A punch. The boat took it without complaint, shuddering steady and patient. A heavyweight who'd been punched before and knew the rhythm of pain.

Wyatt did not.

The deck lifted, then dipped, and his ankles wobbled in that quick, humiliating way he hated. He spread his feet wider and bent his knees. Lock your knees and the boat will teach you a lesson you won't enjoy. He'd learned that much

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in the last hour.

Dax had learned it in the first minute.

She stood beside him, chow and blue heeler mixed together by chance and stubbornness, braced low and calm. Her hindquarters were planted, front legs were straight, but ready to flex on demand. Her head fit neatly through the railing gap, muzzle pointed into the storm, ears flattened back as if they'd been sculpted there. The wind ran its fingers through her thick auburn coat without asking. She didn't seem to mind. When the deck shifted, she shifted, without thought, as if she belonged to the ferry more than the deck did.

The next swell rolled up through the hull and turned his stomach. The ferry rose, paused at the top, undecided, then dropped. Wyatt's grip tightened on the rails. His ribs complained. His replaced hips, ten years old and oddly polite, held steady. But everything else felt loose, bolts backing out one by one. The ferry pitched again, sharper this time, and his stomach finally made the call. He barely managed to lean over the railing before everything he'd eaten came up hard and fast. *There goes the breakfast burrito from the cafeteria.* Most of it made it into the churning gray water below. Most of it. The wind snatched pieces of it and flung them back towards the hull, annoyed at the intrusion. When he finally straightened, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, the last of it splattered across his boot. "Well," he muttered, lifting it a fraction. Dax was already on the job.

She stepped forward and cleaned his boot with efficient enthusiasm, tail wagging as if this had been the plan all along. When she finished, she looked up at him, pleased with herself.

Wyatt laughed. "You're enjoying this too much." The words vanished into the wind.

A voice came from behind him, rife with sarcasm. "Grandpa, looks like you are losing to the ferry!" It was Cole. Hoodie up, cheeks pink from the cold, laughing with

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the easy certainty of a teenager.

Wyatt stared out at the water, weighing the truth of it. "That wasn't losing," he said. "That was just a little recalibration."

Lucas moved in behind Cole, shoulders hunched against the rain. He took one look at his dad's weathered face, then the boot, then the dog's proud expression, and his mouth tightened the way it always did when he was trying not to show too much.

"Cafeteria breakfast burrito?" Lucas asked.

Wyatt wiped his sleeve across his mouth. "And three cups of coffee." A thin smile spread across his face.

Cole laughed harder. "That's not recalibrating. That's what happens when you pregame with gas station coffee."

The wind slipped between them and stole the laugh away, carrying it to one of the passing islands. Lost to the rain.

Out beyond the bow, Prince William Sound widened into something that made Wyatt feel small in a way that was not unkind. Dark trees pressed tight to rock. Snow clung stubbornly to the upper folds of the mountains, retreating only where the sun could reach it, hiding everywhere else. The world looked old and unconcerned, as if waiting for people to stop talking so it could return to itself. The ferry, a blunt instrument in that gray immensity, pushed forward without regard.

Wyatt's beard dripped steadily, water running down his chin and soaking his collar. The cold worked its way through his gloves and coat and into his joints. Sixty-eight years sat heavy in him today. His balance flickered in small negotiations. One second steady, the next bargaining with the ocean. Dax glanced up at him once, eyes bright, checking on him.

Wyatt scratched the top of her head. "You'd make a better sailor than me."

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the throat. Wyatt didn't react, which was the only kind of victory he trusted anymore over this ever increasing voice.

The rain sharpened. Wyatt tugged his wool cap lower as needles of water drove sideways into his face. His silver hair streamed loose beneath it, wild and ungoverned. He wiped his beard with one hand, squeezing the water out, only to watch the wind snatch it away before it could hit the deck. Reclaimed by the storm.

He smiled at that. A small thing, but it felt like a fair trade.

He worked one glove off with his teeth, dug into his coat pocket, fumbling past his keys and lighter before wrapping his grip around a small round tin. He pulled out the can of Copenhagen and thumped it twice with his exposed fingers, then reached in to pull a fresh pinch and packed it into his lip. The burn came quick and sharp, cutting through the remnants of sea salt in his mouth.

The mountains rose again in front of him, and the familiar pressure gathered behind his eyes. The kind of beauty that crowded your thoughts until there wasn't room for anything else. It almost made him forget why he was here.

Forget. The word slid in sideways and stuck.

Early stage Alzheimer's, the doctor had said. Calm voice. Careful eyes. Discussing progression the way you discuss weather patterns. That was two years ago.

Wyatt didn't need the charts to know what it meant. He'd been losing things for years. Keys first. Then words. Names that hovered just out of reach, close enough to hurt. Some days he could laugh it off. Some days he waited quietly for the panic to pass. It wasn't the forgetting that scared him, it was the way that forgetting never seemed to be finished with him. Every day, little things, like a death from a thousand cuts.

Wyatt shook his head and looked to the horizon.